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# A framework for fostering accuracy in EFL oral communication activities

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## Abstract

This paper explores the importance of accuracy in speaking activities conducted in EFL classrooms with students of limited fluency. While descriptivist approaches to language teaching emphasize abundant output and task completion, Japanese university learners of English, perhaps informed by prior emphasis on test-taking and grammatical accuracy, may tend to be more dependent on grammatical knowledge that may interfere with task completion. This paper will propose a set of elements recommended for materials development and explore a series of speaking activities in a number of oral communication textbooks for the presence of these elements. Finally, a framework for assessing the effectiveness of textbooks among learners will be suggested for further discussion.

## 1. Introduction

For better or for worse, Japanese learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) tend to rely heavily on prescriptive structures of grammar that may interfere with the naturalness of spoken language. One instinct of language teachers, when developing materials for oral communication activities, is to err toward a more descriptivist approach that focuses on strategic competence rather than language acquisition. The intention of this approach is to avoid the possibility of learners becoming too focused on grammar structures in order to comply with their given language tasks; instead, learners, as intended, experiment with language to achieve communicative competence with accuracy as a secondary concern.

While this is a well-intentioned approach to EFL education, lower-level

language learners are ultimately better served by more explicit language teaching that reinforces and rewards knowledge of grammar structures necessary for basic oral communication. This paper, therefore, argues for a more guided approach to materials development for lower-level oral communication students. After providing a brief overview of the pedagogical underpinnings of descriptivism in language teaching, I will propose elements of an approach to materials development that greater emphasizes guided language learning and practice for students whose level of fluency still requires development before a more open approach to fluency development can be undertaken. A selection of speaking activities in textbooks that foster oral communication skills will be examined to determine if these materials have such elements, and thus provide more guidance to beginning language learners.

## **2. Approaches to language learning**

“Contemporary” approaches to language learning such as task-based language teaching (TBLT) and communicative language teaching (CLT) emphasize a more holistic view of communicative competence rather than a singular focus on grammatical and lexical accuracy. Put another way, these approaches place a value on comprehensible (however imperfect) output equal to or greater than that placed on the accuracy of that output. As long as a “task” is completed without dependence on L1, regardless of the quality of L2 output, the interaction in such a learning environment can be considered successful.

Sato (2010) wrote at length on the shortcomings of such approaches, at least among Japanese EFL learners. His paper focused on the suitability of teaching approaches that favored assessment of declarative knowledge (in this case, a learner’s ability to articulate the rules of a foreign language) over that of procedural knowledge (in this case, a learner’s ability to use a foreign language) in Japanese education. Ultimately, Sato argues that more traditional approaches to language learning are preferred in the Japanese context as they are more conducive to paper-based assessments. While there certainly are valid criticisms of this position (Sybing, 2011; Urick, 2011), the assertion that a significant number of Japanese EFL learners in university contexts is dependent on accuracy, whether because of assessments or because of other reasons, remains difficult to dispute.

Regardless of any subsequent criticisms of the Japanese educational system with respect to the teaching of foreign languages, language learners dependent on the need for accuracy ultimately require materials that guide them to accuracy in oral communication activities.

On the basis of these concerns, there is reason to question whether oral communication textbooks and materials provide explicit guidance in conversation- and discussion-based activities sufficient to address concerns over language development while still preserving the principles of task compliance. There is little doubt that textbooks, even those that emphasize greater opportunities for fluency development after a nominally required degree of treatment of language, tend to differ greatly in design and pedagogy. To examine these materials for the purpose of assessing their value to beginning language learners, I propose definition of a series of elements that may or may not be present in oral communication textbooks, but whose presence is ultimately beneficial to learners of limited fluency.

### 3. Elements of guided language acquisition

The framework for language use and language test performance proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996) provides the guidance for the prospective framework in this paper. Both topical knowledge and language ability are critical to strategic competence. Bachman and Palmer define topical knowledge as “provid[ing] the information base that enables [learners] to use language with reference to the world in which they live, and hence is involved in all language use” (p. 65). Language knowledge, on the other hand, is that knowledge used in “creating and interpreting discourse in language use” (p. 67). Put another way, one requires topical knowledge to determine *what* to say, and language knowledge to determine *how* to say it. Strategic competence, therefore, is “the integration of all of these components as language users create and interpret discourse in situationally appropriate ways” (p. 70).

This paper, therefore, recommends the following five elements in materials development necessary to guide beginning language learners in oral communication activities.

**Schematic facilitators.** Learners need to be directed on what topical

knowledge to use in practice. Examples of facilitators that meet this objective include photographs, artwork or other visual stimuli that are thematic in nature and inform learners about the theme of a given lesson. Some materials will use discussion or “starter” questions to activate schema, but such activities presuppose a level of language ability. For the purposes of this paper, a facilitator should require little or no language ability to activate a learner’s schema.

**Vocabulary banks.** A list of topical vocabulary that would otherwise not be grouped together in a general vocabulary list teaches or reinforces vocabulary that is relevant to the theme of the lesson and useful in spoken language about the lesson’s theme.

**Expression banks.** Similar to vocabulary banks, these lists would provide possible structures or full expressions to practice in oral communication activities. Some materials provide translations in L1, but, as publishers do not always tailor materials to language learners sharing a common L1, they are not taken into consideration for the purposes of this paper.

**Usage explanations.** Such explanations are explicit (by providing declarative knowledge) and/or implicit (by providing example usage), and ultimately reinforce language knowledge in learners. This paper asserts that, in the ideal, providing both types of explanations is necessary for learners to understand *how* and *why* target language is used.

**Skeleton dialogues.** An example conversation can provide students with explicit guidance on how to interact in L2 with another language user. Parts of example conversations are typically marked to indicate where learners use their own ideas to make the interaction more personal or more relevant to them.

It is important to note that none of these elements are mutually exclusive from the others. A skeleton dialogue, for example, may incorporate a list of vocabulary words, much in the same way marginal glosses allow learners to incidentally acquire knowledge of vocabulary (Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996). The guiding question in this paper is to what degree materials for a given lesson provide these elements.

Moreover, this is by no means an exhaustive list of elements that facilitate acquisition of topical or language knowledge. Academics are welcome to argue the inclusion of other types of structures that guide language learning. However, these are the five elements that this researcher finds both common and useful for

oral communication activities.

#### 4. The study

This paper focuses on an examination of five textbooks that focus in whole or in part on oral communication skills and are used in university settings in Japan. The textbooks chosen were also modular in nature; put another way, topical knowledge and language knowledge acquired in a given lesson of a textbook might be useful but are otherwise not required in other lessons. Textbooks intended for beginning or starting language users, determined by use of the words “beginner” or “starter” in the textbook, are used. Some textbooks also reference the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR); textbooks which are explicitly and exclusively labeled A2 or higher were not considered for this study.

The study examined one speaking activity from each of the textbooks listed above. Descriptions are provided in this paper for each activity, followed by a determination of the presence of each of the five elements listed in this paper.

***New Interchange 1, Unit 8, Page 50, Part 9.*** This is an activity entitled “Grammar Focus,” which reinforces knowledge of countable and uncountable nouns, and the question words associated with each type of noun (e.g. “How much crime is there?” and “How many restaurants are there?”). Questions similar to the above examples, expressing and requiring students to demonstrate use of the target language, are provided for learners in pairs to practice.

Schematic building is done in a previous section that includes a snapshot of a bar chart with the title “10 important things to look for in a community” to reinforce vocabulary such as “clean water” and “unemployment.” While examples for usage of countable and uncountable nouns are provided, no explicit explanations for their usage are given. Students in pairs can look at the above examples for guidance as they practice the language, but no discrete skeleton dialogue is provided as written in the textbook.

***Communication Spotlight Starter, Unit 7, Page 49, Part 10.*** This is an activity entitled “Using What You’ve Learned.” The activity requires students in pairs to make questions about a set of pictures depicting the everyday activities of the characters in each picture and give appropriate answers (e.g. “What is the boy

Table 1. List of Textbooks Examined in the Study

<b><i>Textbook</i></b>	<b><i>Level indicator</i></b>	<b><i>Unit</i></b>	<b><i>Topical knowledge</i></b>	<b><i>Language knowledge</i></b>
<i>New Interchange 1</i> , Cambridge University Press	Description on back cover: “for adult and young adult learners of English at the beginning to intermediate levels”	8: How do you like the neighborhood?	Plan of the Book: “Stores and places in a city; neighborhoods; houses and apartments”	Plan of the Book: “ <i>There is/there are; one, any, some</i> ; prepositions of place; questions: <i>how much</i> and <i>how many</i> ; countable and uncountable nouns
<i>Communication Spotlight Starter (Second Edition)</i> , ABAX ELT Publishers	CEFR A1-A2	7: You’re going to work?	Contents: “Talking about future plans”	vocabulary for everyday activities; be + modal + base verb
<i>Impact Issues 1 (New Edition)</i> , Pearson Longman	Description on back cover: “for beginning level students”	10: Fan Worship	Contents: “A young woman talks about her obsession with a rock band.”	expressions to confirm agreement or disagreement with opinions
<i>Inspire 1</i> , Cengage Learning	CEFR A1-A2	5: Homes	Scope and Sequence: “Talking About Homes/Where do you live?”	vocabulary for furniture; expressions to describe living spaces and locations of items
<i>Skillful Listening &amp; Speaking Foundation</i> , MacMillan Academic Skills	CEFR A1	5: Taste	Contents: “Describing a favorite meal or snack”	Contents: “Changing nouns to adjectives by adding –y,” “Simple present tense”

doing tomorrow afternoon?” and “He is going to have lunch with his friends.”)

Learners are introduced to the topic at the beginning of the unit, with a similar set of pictures and a matching vocabulary bank. Target expressions (e.g. “Are you going to study English tomorrow?”) are not explicitly defined as such, but are taught inductively in previous sections, particularly in listening activities. Example language is provided in this and all other speaking activities in the unit, but again, no skeleton dialogue is given.

**Impact Issues 1, Unit 10, Page 47.** After reading a series of opinions based on a previous listening activity, students are asked to agree or disagree with, and then discuss each opinion with another classmate.

Schema is activated in the previous listening activity (as well as the pre-listening discussion questions). Vocabulary is provided as glosses for the listening but is not specifically connected to the speaking activity. A set of target language used to confirm and express agreement and disagreement is provided, and a limited example of a discussion is given for students to model. Again, no specific explanations are provided for the usage of the target language.

**Inspire 1, Unit 5, Page 53.** Students are required to listen to and read a script of a short conversation. In pairs, students then practice the conversation, using the provided vocabulary, and then their own ideas.

The topic of the unit (i.e. homes) is established in prior listening and speaking activities, and through visuals of families in their homes. Grammar and expressions are not explicitly provided or explained, but there is vocabulary to substitute for the expressions in the script, which later serves as a skeleton dialogue, as well as vocabulary in a previous listening activity.

**Skillful Listening & Speaking Foundation, Unit 5, Page 55.** The speaking task begins with a conversation about the topic, which is food. Based on the grammar taught in previous activities, students circle verbs in the simple present tense (e.g. “We usually drink soda with them.”), and underline the expression that asks for clarification (e.g. “Can you explain that?”). The conversation describes a particular food – in this case, nachos – and is a model for a speaking activity in which pairs of students, after some brainstorming, describe their favorite food and ask follow-up questions.

A picture of a plate of nachos accompanies the script of the conversation, and there is ample visual information in previous activities to guide students on

the relevant topic knowledge. A vocabulary bank for basic food is provided in the listening skills section, and other vocabulary words for food are provided throughout the unit prior to the speaking task. Explanations and usage examples of simple present tense verbs are given in a previous grammar practice activity. However, while the script acts as a model, it does not easily allow students to substitute their own language and, thus, ideas into the conversation.

## 5. Discussion

It is important to underscore that the textbooks selected in this study were taken from a sample of convenience, and that the analysis of a select number of speaking activities is not intended to extrapolate any conclusions to other speaking activities, across entire textbooks or to other textbooks. This analysis also does not discount the presence and use of supplemental materials outside of the textbook to further guide learners. What this sample is intended to show is the degree of variety in speaking activities in materials that focus on oral communication, and thus the various approaches to language learning that attempt to develop language ability in beginning language learners.

There are general conventions in materials design that appear to be observed by the writers of the textbooks examined in this paper. For example, the units examined all begin with activities intended for schematic activation, then progress toward a treatment of L2 grammar and/or expressions before practice activities in L2 oral communication. As a rule of thumb, each of the units chosen for this study begins with an emphasis toward input, and progresses toward a greater degree of learner output.

Nonetheless, fundamental differences among even a non-exhaustive sample of textbooks for beginning language learners confirm a lack of consensus for more concrete standards in materials development. Schematic activation differs greatly among the textbooks examined, for example. Vocabulary banks are integrated in different aspects of given lessons depending on the textbook chosen, but the degree to which they may be considered relevant to speaking activities remains a difficult question to answer. Schematic facilitators in *Communication Spotlight*, on one hand, include vocabulary for learners to use in later speaking activities, while *Impact Issues* provides vocabulary explanations as glosses for their listening



activities. *Impact Issues* does provide target expressions for speaking activities, but does not provide explicit explanations for the use of those expressions, while *New Interchange* provides both aspects when treating new target grammar. In short, there are significant variations among textbooks and, consequently, signification variations in pedagogical approaches regarding how best to approach language development among beginning language learners.

Most relevant to the scope of this paper, however, is none of the speaking activities chosen for this study appear to have all of the elements defined in this paper. With these materials, language learners of limited fluency might encounter difficulties in expressing their ideas in L2 without sufficient guidance scaffolding their language development.

## 6. Proposed framework

Given the above theoretical and pedagogical underpinnings, I propose the following set of considerations for materials development for language learners in beginner to lower-intermediate oral communication classes. Such learners would have had little to no prior meaningful experience in practicing L2 in activities that are oriented toward oral communication. For the benefit of these learners, this paper suggests that educators examine textbooks and ask the following questions:

- Are the speaking activities sufficiently connected to materials that reinforce topical and language knowledge?
- Are there sufficient vocabulary and expressions defined in the materials to provide learners with enough input to express their ideas in L2?
- Do the materials provide sufficient explanation of language use or enough input to allow learners to understand how and why language is used?
- Do speaking activities sufficiently allow learners freedom to express their ideas while possessing sufficient structure to guide learners in the use of the target language?

Depending on how teachers view their students and their needs, the threshold at which textbooks can satisfactorily address these questions will indeed vary. It is my opinion, however, that in order to address the needs of my beginning students, materials that seek to answer all of the above concerns should, as best as possible, possess the elements I have described in this paper.

## 7. Conclusion

Ideally, materials that satisfactorily address the framework described above may very well be materials that are designed by the teacher specifically for his or her students, as only that teacher knows the specific needs of his or her language learners. However, as this raises pragmatic concerns (especially with respect to the time and effort required to design materials), educators would do well to be able to evaluate textbooks at first glance through the prism of the framework proposed above. At minimum, educators should examine materials for the discrete elements that they feel are most effective for their language learners. This paper provides both an explicitly defined set of elements in materials that I believe foster language acquisition among learners of limited fluency, as well as a more general framework that allows a more informed scrutiny of those materials. I invite educators to view textbooks through a more informed lens, and also urge educators, when addressing the needs of beginning language learners, to err on the side of providing more guided language learning much like the conditions described in this paper.

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